Confronting Nuclear Challenges: Ukraine’s Historic Choices

By

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Roundtable Discussion
Twenty Years of Renunciation of Nuclear Weapons by Ukraine: Lessons Learned and Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament

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I wish to begin today by thanking the Permanent Mission of Ukraine for organizing this roundtable to commemorate Ukraine’s historic renunciation of nuclear weapons twenty years ago.

It is a sobering commentary on our times—given our obsession with the present—that a significant segment of our fellow citizens who were born after 1994 probably do not know that thousands of nuclear warheads, with long-range bombers and missiles to deliver them, were once located in Ukraine.

And Ukraine, of course, was not alone. When the Soviet Union officially dissolved in December 1991, the newly-independent states of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inherited more than 6,000 nuclear weapons. This large nuclear inheritance inspired deeply troubling visions of unchecked proliferation and, possibly, nuclear confrontation.

However, thanks to strong and visionary leadership in the concerned States, these nightmarish scenarios quickly dissipated. All nuclear weapons deployed in Ukraine were returned to the Soviet Union by the end of 1996. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine gave up their nuclear weapons voluntarily and acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as non-nuclear-weapon States, a commitment that all three fulfilled and continue to abide by today.

Together with other nuclear abstainers such as South Africa, Argentina and Brazil, and others, the commitments by Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine prove that the acquisition of nuclear weapons is neither inevitable nor unalterable. Together, they offer hope for a future world without nuclear weapons—by their actions, they have effectively challenged the cynical adage that the nuclear “genie is out of its bottle” and can never be returned.

While Ukraine has long been a champion of global nuclear disarmament, it has also demonstrated its leadership in support of peaceful uses of nuclear energy, particularly in the field of nuclear safety. Last Saturday—on 26 April—the world marked the 28th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the worst nuclear power plant accident in history. In that tragedy, hundreds of emergency workers risked their lives in responding to the accident; over 330,000 people were evacuated from surrounding areas with little hope of return; thousands of children later developed thyroid cancer; and today some six million people still live in vast areas of several countries that were contaminated by this accident.

For several years now, Ukraine has spearheaded an initiative to convene important conferences at which world leaders agreed on a fundamental principle: nuclear safety is our common goal, our common responsibility. Because nuclear accidents respect no borders, we owe it to our citizens to practice the highest standards of preparedness and response. To date, Ukraine has taken the lead in the efforts to complete the construction of the radiation containment facility and related nuclear safety projects at Chernobyl in accordance with international standards.

Aside from giving up its nuclear weapons and promoting nuclear safety, Ukraine has also been a leader in defence conversion—as seen in its work to transform former SS-18 ICBMs into commercial space launch vehicles for satellites.
Ukraine is therefore offering us all a powerful example for others to follow in the years ahead—vision of a safer world free of nuclear weapons and threats of their use.

This is in fact where I believe most of the world is currently heading. This is why it is so important for all of the commitments relating to the NPT—including in the fields of nuclear disarmament and security assurances for non-nuclear-weapon States—to be implemented in full.

As we meet today, NPT States Parties are gathering to open the third session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference. This is a splendid opportunity for the Parties to re-dedicate themselves to the fulfilment of the responsibilities rooted in that treaty relating to nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Ukraine’s wise words and actions in renouncing nuclear weapons must inspire us all to get on with the work of renouncing nuclear weapons globally. This offers the only absolute guarantee against any future use of such weapons. Its achievement would constitute one of the greatest advances for humanity of all time. Let us heed what Ukraine is teaching us all.